



Savvas, T. (2019). Vegetarianism in the Anthropocene: Richard Powers and Jonathan Franzen. *Textual Practice*, 33(2), 213-228. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1509273>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1080/0950236X.2018.1509273](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1509273)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Taylor & Francis at <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0950236X.2018.1509273>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

Vegetarianism in the Anthropocene: Richard Powers and Jonathan Franzen

Theophilus Savvas

English Department,

University of Bristol,

3-5 Woodland Road,

Bristol

BS8 1TB

theo.savvas@bristol.ac.uk

This article uses the representation of vegetarianism in Richard Powers' *The Echo Maker* (2006) and Jonathan Franzen's *Purity* (2015) as a way to think about broader issues of ecological engagement. It argues that these issues are related to the ways in which each writer approaches questions of subjectivity and form after postmodernism. It concludes that the posthumanist dimension of Powers' novel, achieved through formal experimentation, is a more successful engagement with the questions posed by the age of the Anthropocene than Franzen's continued realism.

Keywords: Richard Powers, Jonathan Franzen, Anthropocene, vegetarianism, postmodernism, realism

A recent issue of the *Times Literary Supplement* features a review of two books which are concerned with cultural representations of meat, and another which considers four books focused on the ethics of eating meat.¹ This suggests that the prominent trend in debating the ethics of eating, highlighted in the wide-readership of books such as Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001) and Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (2007), has taken a specific, and not unexpected, turn. In recent years, the ethics of eating meat has become framed as part of a wider debate on global sustainability and climate change with significant evidence now suggesting that reduction in or elimination of foods derived from animals would provide global economic and health benefits.² As such it is hardly surprising that two writers frequently described as 'econovelists' – Richard Powers and Jonathan Franzen – have included the topic in recent novels.³ Both these writers also feature prominently in the conversation about postpostmodernism, and in this piece I use those ethical debates as a way to focus on matters of subjectivity and form after postmodernism.⁴ In the conclusion I frame these matters within the context of New Sincerity and the emergent concept of the Anthropocene to suggest that it is Powers' *The Echo Maker* (2006), rather than Franzen's *Purity* (2015), that most successfully addresses the cultural exigencies of the present.

I. Purity and Human Failure

There is a long history of association of female bodies with meat. It is long enough and important enough that one scholar – Carol J. Adams – has written of the need for a 'feminist-vegetarian critical theory' to address the matter of 'the sexual politics of meat'.⁵ Adams provides myriad examples of the association, as well as a framework for understanding the metaphor, 'woman-as-meat', which allows her to make a convincing case for the suggestion that carnivorousness is an 'integral part of male dominance'; vegetarianism

thus demonstrates a ‘sign of dis-ease with patriarchal culture’, and ought always be ‘part of the practice of feminism.’⁶ Anabel Tyler in Jonathan Franzen’s fifth novel, *Purity*, would certainly agree with Adams. When she is introduced to the reader she is wrapped in butcher paper with ‘YOUR MEAT’ scrawled across it as a protest against the underrepresentation of females on the Faculty of Tyler Art College.⁷ She continues her protestation of the linked exploitation of females and animals throughout her time at the college, and, for her final project at Tyler – a film titled ‘A River of Meat’ – splices together footage of a cow being bolt-gunned in a slaughterhouse with images of the coronation of Miss America in 1966. These are preparatory pieces for the major work of her life: the painstaking construction of a film detailing the inscription of a grid of 232-square-centimeter ‘cuts’ on her body, each of which she will spend a week acquainting herself with, in a bid to ‘reclaim possession of her body, cut by cut, from the world of men and meat.’ ‘After ten years,’ we are told, ‘she’d own herself entirely’ (402). Anabel’s rejection of the patriarchy is reflected in her rejection of her father’s fortune, the source of which is his work with McCaskil, one of the biggest corporate meat producers in the country. Literalising the metaphor that Adams highlights becomes both Anabel’s life’s work, and a way of reworking the conditions of that life.

The presentation of this radical vegetarian-feminist warrants further attention because the way in which Anabel and her beliefs are framed in the novel suggests some of the reasons why she might feel the need to ‘reclaim’ herself from the world of men in the first place. That emphatic act of rebellion through which the reader is first acquainted with Anabel is undercut by the fact that the narrative trigger for it is the presentation, via a tip-off – and as if on a plate – of Anabel to Tom Aberrant, editor of the school magazine, as a possible subject for a juicy report. Anabel’s story, then, is in the hands of a controlling male editor, even before we meet the woman herself. Anabel and Tom begin a relationship that will eventually see them married, but that relationship, and Anabel’s art, is nearly always focalised through Tom, and

so seen through the male prism. This perspective undercuts and trivialises Anabel's reasons for her vegetarianism; in so doing it also necessarily undercuts and trivialises her feminist ideals. The abstinence from flesh that Anabel has imposed upon Tom as a precondition of their relationship leaves him 'constantly half nauseated', and the description of Anabel as 'full-chestedly anorexic' conflates the 'symptoms' of her dietary choice with those of an illness usually considered in terms of body-image issues; it also connotes that there is something unnatural about her retention of female attributes (195).⁸ Tom, we have been told, is 'not afraid of anyone's opinion of how he looked', suggestively furthering the notion that Anabel's malady is female and vain (177). Vegetarianism, then, is figured as unnatural and unhealthy; it is constructed as a disorder of the female mind, like hysteria, which, as with all mental illnesses has a concomitant effect on the body. When, after a few years, both the marriage and Anabel's mental health start to fail, Tom feels guilty, commenting, 'I couldn't leave until I'd helped her out of the stuck place I'd allowed her to fall into' (408). Both Anabel's moral position and her agency are undermined by the characters' pronouncement on her, and any attempt by Anabel to work her way out of that perspective – to 'own herself entirely' – seems doomed.

One might be tempted to put this down to characterisation, with Tom's comments constituting the expression of the inevitable frustrations of a relationship. However, the non-chronological structuring of the novel frames how we view the dietary proclivities of Anabel, and seems to work to confirm this perspective on her. The novel opens with a mother lamenting the state of her body – and life – in a telephone conversation with her daughter: 'My body is betraying me again. Sometimes I think my life is nothing but one long process of bodily betrayal' (3). The daughter – Purity 'Pip' Tyler – points out the universal nature of these concerns, but her mother is not pacified: 'This is the terrible thing about bodies. They're so visible, so visible,' she concludes (4). These complaints, combined with her

subsequent rejection of Pip's offer to bring her a cake with stevia in it because the sugar substitute has a deleterious effect on her 'mouth chemistry,' means that we are likely to agree with Pip's assessment of her mother: 'problematic,' if not quite 'crazy' (3-4). Reviewers of *Purity* have certainly concurred with this view of the mother: 'not-quite-sane' was the verdict of Colm Toibin in *The New York Times*, an 'oppressively needy hypochondriac', suggested Duncan White in *The Daily Telegraph*, 'a fully-fledged Miss Havisham', wrote Tim Adams in the *Guardian*.⁹ Within these first few pages we also learn, but only indirectly, of the unsurprising dietary choice of this 'Hippie single mom': one of those on Pip's shortlist of possible partners for her mother is deemed more suitable than the others because he is 'likewise a vegan' (6).¹⁰ That veganism is coded, then, as an attempt on behalf of a 'problematic' woman to establish control over the only part of her life amenable to it: her body. Corporeal in the original sense of 'to do with the body' rather than the spiritual, the concerns of Pip's mother seem self-absorbed in the extreme. The mother here – 'Penelope Tyler' – is Anabel, who, in her struggle to reclaim her life from patriarchy has disavowed completely her former identity – though the intricate nature of the plotting means that the reader does not find this out until much later in the novel. The effect of this is that when Anabel is introduced in a following section set in the narrative past, the reader has already been primed to read female abstinence as the site where physical and moral vanity coincide; it encourages us to read her feminist-vegetarian ethic as the result of and perhaps a mask for these concerns.¹¹

The opening also, of course, proleptically confirms the view that without a controlling male – her father or Tom – Anabel cannot survive. The narrative seems to endorse the view of male predation and hopeless female victimhood set out by its nastiest of characters, the appropriately named Andreas Wolf, 'internet outlaw' (10). In an email to Pip, Wolf writes: 'Maybe being male is like being born a predator, and maybe the only right thing for the

predator to do, if it sympathises with smaller animals and won't accept that it was born to kill them, is to betray its nature and starve to death. But maybe it's like something else – like being born with more money than others. Then the right thing to do becomes a more interesting social question' (66). After the revelation of Wolf's secret abuse of young, vulnerable women when acting as a church counselor, his thoughts here can only be interpreted as (hardly coherent) amoralistic solipsism designed to rationalise his own behaviour; it certainly does not help that the narrative itself (rather than simply Wolf) seems to offer up the rather tired trope of dysfunctional childhood and oedipal desires as the cause of (if not necessarily an excuse for) his abusive tendencies. That the much older Wolf successfully seduces Pip – into working for him, into a relationship with him – as part of what emerges as a complicated plot to get revenge on her father, only confirms the novel's message of the vulnerability of women.

It is surely one of the functions, and perhaps the main function – apart from to provoke cynical laughter – of Anabel as a flat character to demonstrate the more rounded, if still vulnerable, character of Pip. Pip, we are told, has learned from her mother 'the importance of leading a morally purposeful life', but she 'shudders' at the word 'purity' (29, 47). In this way, her desire 'to *do* good [deeds]' ought to be contrasted against the rather different (and impossible aim) of *being* good, which, Franzen seems to intimate marks Anabel. Pip is marked as one who will shun the idealism of the most ardent character in the novel – her mother – in favour of doing what she can. *Purity* emerges, then, as a paean to the importance of being realistic, which Anabel is not. Early in the novel, Pip notes her mother's 'unworldliness', and Tom's mother, horrified at his choice of girlfriend, implores him to find a more 'REALISTIC person to make a happy life with' (7, 397; capitals in original); his experience with Anabel, indeed, leaves him with 'a lifelong allergy to unrealistic women' (443). Tom's decision to leave Anabel, and accept a 20-million-pound cheque from her

father, marks his return to ‘reality’ in the novel, as he uses the funds to establish his investigative newsmagazine and thus ‘do good’ with the impure money. Tom’s compromise is one that Anabel – who has run off, pregnant with Pip – would not accept. But, near the end of the novel, and in the narrative present, Anabel (now Penelope) is persuaded by Pip to finally take some of her father’s fortune because, in Pip’s words, ‘it’s real’ (554). Whether this is intended as a source of hope – the acceptance of an inheritance that will allow for a happier future (for Pip, at least) – or as a more cynical suggestion that, in the end, ideals mean nothing is an open question. But it certainly suggests that Franzen is continuing the trend of *Freedom*, in which he elaborates ‘how bogus is the very notion of sustaining a uniform world of coherent values – an ideological stance capable of withstanding all challenges to it,’ as Philip Weinstein puts it.¹² Anabel’s worldview is characterised, caricatured, perhaps, as just such a bogus view – a struggle for an impossible, and, in the end, destructive ‘purity’ of body, mind and soul. Given that Tom’s acceptance of the money brought with it a renunciation of vegetarianism, one might wonder what will become of Anabel’s final acceptance of a reality premised upon money rather than ideals: the implication seems to be that it must also entail a repudiation of her vegetarian-feminist ethic.

If the radical idealism of Anabel is stymied by the urge towards accepting ‘reality’ within the novel, it is also, I would suggest, constrained by the form of the novel. Some of the consequences of Franzen’s devotion to realism have been discussed by Margaret Hunt Gram in her reading of *Freedom* (2010). Hunt notes that the novel cleaves to a belief in the liberal individual subject (partly because of Franzen’s Lukácsian conception of realism), and suggests that this prevents it from successfully incorporating within its discourse one of the main themes: overpopulation. Unplottable at the level of the individual, Franzen can only represent this element by having Walter Berglund speechify, producing what Gram labels ‘discursive disruptions.’¹³ In *Purity*, the effect of this commitment to the individual subject, I

would suggest, is that Anabel's vegetarianism can only be conceived as 'an individual moral adventure'; as a result, it becomes little more than a mask for problems of the self, as we have seen.¹⁴ The novel does at one point gesture towards the broader context in which the ethics of eating needs to be placed:

[...] to drive east on Amarillo Boulevard was to pass, in quick succession, the high-security Clements Unit prison complex, the McCaskill meat-processing facility, and the Pantex nuclear-weapons plant, three massive installations more alike than different in their brute utility and sodium-vapor lighting. In the rearview mirror were the evangelical churches, the Tea Party precinct, the Whataburgers. Ahead, the gas and oil wells, the fracking rigs, the overgrazed ranges, the feedlots, the depleted aquifer (173)

But this only makes the dismissal of the vegetarianism (and by proxy the feminism) of Anabel even more problematic. Since the logic of the novel – in the sense not only of how other characters respond to Anabel, but how the structure frames the reader's response to her – suggests Anabel's disconnection from reality, with the corollary implication being that she ought to accept the world of her father and McCaskill, it is difficult to see how there can be any resistance to the rest of this clearly pejorative image of the States. The novel, in other words, accepts this world – as Anabel is persuaded to – and in so doing becomes complicit in it.

II. *The Echo Maker* and Non-Human Possibility

In 'Making the Rounds', Richard Powers writes that, 'physics has increasingly moved away from reducing systems to individual, controlled variables and towards representing by means of massive simulation. To understand rich phenomena in the real world, new sciences build analogous rich evocative models and then explore the systemic effects of small changes within the simulation'.¹⁵ Powers' description of the new physics might also serve as a description of the way in which the novel has traditionally functioned. Certainly in Powers' 2006 novel, *The Echo Maker*, the world figures as just such a simulation. Or at least it does

for Mark Schluter, the character around which the novel rotates. *The Echo Maker* opens with the aftermath of a car crash in which Mark has suffered a severe brain trauma, leaving him with Capgras Syndrome, a condition which severs the connection between external reality and emotion. Although Mark sees the world around him accurately, his brain no longer produces the affective response that gives that world meaning. He can recognize Karin, his sister, for instance, but he cannot recognize her *as his sister*; for Mark, this Karin is an imposter, a nearly perfect replica of the real Karin. As the novel proceeds this failure of affective association extends first to Mark's dog, then his home, and eventually the whole town. The tightly controlled plot of the novel – a hallmark of Powers, whose fiction manages to dovetail (not always successfully) the highly cerebral and the narrative drive of a bestseller – hinges upon two questions: what happened to Mark on the night of his accident? and will he ever recover his true self and see the world around him for the reality that it is? While Powers dutifully answers the former of these, the latter is held in abeyance, for it represents precisely the kind of question that Powers as a novelist is interested in troubling and undermining.¹⁶

The Echo Maker also tells the tale of Gerald Weber, a celebrity neuroscientist and popular science writer, whom Karin enlists for a second opinion on Mark's condition. Weber, in contrast to the hospital's doctor, argues that Capgras Syndrome is not simply the result of localised trauma, but rather a manifestation of the system trying to *maintain* normality: 'whatever lesions he has suffered, he's also producing psychodynamic responses to trauma,' Weber suggests.¹⁷ Capgras Syndrome, then, is a product of the brain's homeostatic impulse, and, as Weber suggests in a lecture, is only an exaggeration of the way in which an undamaged brain functions: 'The job of consciousness is to make sure that all of the distributed modules of the brain seem integrated' (459). Mark's mind 'smoothes over' the disconnections since, as Weber puts it, 'Reason invents elaborately unreasonable

explanations to explain a deficit in emotion. Logic depends upon feeling' (94). In an attempt to trigger emotional memory in him, medical staff ask Mark about his job at Iowa Beef Processors. Mark's palpable relief – 'thank God', he thinks – that they do not ask him how he feels towards the slaughtered animals is telling (56). It suggests that this was the very question that they should have asked, for it would have provoked the kind of affective response the medical staff were seeking. The implication here is that Mark's job has already required that he suppress an intuitive emotional response to his work. This is, perhaps, not surprising given the nature of that work, but we also learn, via his sister's reminiscence, that he had been exceptionally fond of animals as a child, and that he would 'relate long epics from Animalia, the country humans couldn't get to, populated by heroes, rogues, tricksters, and victims' (27). 'Animals like me,' the eleven-year-old Mark had claimed, 'And they did, without fail. Everything on the farm trusted him', confirms Karin (29). The claim of Mark's eleven-year-old self is not just an expression of the presumed and anthropomorphised affective disposition of animals toward him. It is dual coded, for it is also a statement of his own animality: '*animals, like me*', it also implies. It is precisely this awareness of his own animality, and the human place in the wider non-human world, that Mark has had to repudiate to work at the beef processors. In other words, even before the accident, Mark has had to sever the connection between external reality and affective response to that reality.¹⁸ The novel, then, forces the reader to question why such disconnections should be necessary in the late capitalist world.

The novel's setting in the Midwest is instructive for an understanding of this, since it is here, in 'the heart of the heartland' of America, that the dramatic decline in farmland communities, and the rise of agribusiness has been felt most keenly.¹⁹ This agribusiness depends for its success on disconnections, as Michael Pollan notes in his bestselling *The*

Omnivore's Dilemma which largely focuses on the Midwest, and which was published in the same year as Powers' novel. In his introduction, Pollan writes that,

what we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world [...] Our eating also constitutes a relationship with dozens of other species – plants, animals, and fungi – with which we have coevolved to the point where our fates are deeply entwined [...] What is most troubling, and sad, about industrial eating is how thoroughly it obscures all these relationships and connections [...] But forgetting, or not knowing in the first place, is what the industrial food chain is all about, the principal reason it is so opaque, for if we could see what lies on the far side of the increasingly high walls of our industrial agriculture, we would surely change the way we eat.²⁰

Pollan is surely correct here, but Powers' novel suggests that the possession of facts alone may not be enough to trigger such a change. When Weber and Karin meet over a pizza to discuss Mark, Karin comments, 'I'm surprised they can sell any cow parts at all, in this part of the country. You should hear what goes on at that plant. Ask Mark. It'll put you off your feed for good. You know, they have to clip the horns to prevent the crazed beasts from goring each other' (178). Karin's word choice here is notable for the way in which it lays bare the tensions and contradictions in our thinking about non-human animals. In referring to 'cow parts' Karin foregrounds the butchery involved, and affirms linguistically that she is aware of the horrors of the meat industry as she reinstates the referent (the cow) absented by the occlusive term 'beef'. While her use of 'feed' (rather than food) might draw together the human and the non-human – we speak more readily of 'animal feed' than we do of 'human feed' – the phrase 'crazed beasts' serves to 'other' the creatures. Karin's surprise at the fact that the treatment of the creatures in the plant does not prevent their parts being sold as human feed stems from the belief that the treatment might render the 'cow parts' unfit for human consumption; her assertion that knowledge of that treatment ought to put one off eating the parts, then, is not an ethical imperative concerned with animal welfare. Knowledge

of the facts does not, in fact, ‘hinder her appetite’, nor does it prevent her from ordering the meat supreme pizza (178).

On her own terms, then, Karin’s decision to eat meat is illogical. Given Weber’s – and, I think, the novel’s – neurological position that ‘Logic depends upon feeling,’ it is no surprise that Karin does not (at this point in the novel) make the dietary change spoken of by Pollan. Mark’s accident leaves Karin understandably numb, but the brief descriptions of the life she led before it suggests that she had already accepted a life with minimal feeling: ‘Past thirty, she had no more time or pride to risk on ambition. Nothing wrong with honest gruntwork for a secure company that lacked all pretension [...] She couldn’t explain to her brother or anyone: status and satisfaction meant nothing. Competence was all. At long last, her life had stopped misleading her’ (16). If there is an element of willed submission here, it is also a submission called for by the corporate world in which she lives and works.²¹ Upon his arrival in Kearney, Nebraska, Weber thinks that he ‘might have been anywhere’, noting that ‘the usual gamut of franchises – motel, gas, convenience store, and fast food – reassured the accidental pilgrim that he was somewhere just like anywhere. Progress would at last render every place terminally familiar’ (97). The anonymity of this place is both produced by and reinforcing of the capitalist structure which dictates our tastes, and which requires a commensurate anonymity from individuals. Karin has accepted the depthless life on offer to her. Since ‘logic depends upon feeling’, Karin, lacking the *affective* response towards non-human suffering cannot (at this stage in the novel) commit to the *ethical* response to such suffering.²²

The character in the novel who does have a sense of ethical obligation is Daniel, childhood friend of Mark, ex-boyfriend of Karin, and a ‘scarecrow vegan’ who lives like an ‘anchorite’ and works for the local crane refuge (89). Daniel, we are told, ‘mourned more than the cranes. He needed humans to rise to their station: conscious and godlike, nature’s

one shot at knowing and preserving itself. Instead that one aware animal in creation had torched the place' (72). What Daniel mourns here is the human failure to live up to the ethical potentialities and responsibilities conferred upon our species by nature and his way of thinking recalls Michel Serres' belief that there is the need for a kind of 'natural contract' (to replace the 'social contract') through which the human would become the 'steward' of the planet.²³ For Serres this would bring forth a new – and better – kind of humanism. Many reviewers suggested that the undeniably preachy tone of Daniel must mean that he is a conduit for the author's own 'self-righteousness'.²⁴ This kind of charge has dogged Powers' career, but here, at least, seems wide of the mark. Daniel's cringing at the price of a meal in a restaurant, because 'eight dollars is a lot of money to the Crane refuge', his request for a 'plateful of sliced vegetables [...] raw carrots, cucumbers [...]' and his 'quibbling with them' when they arrive, hardly suggest that the novel 'surrenders' to Daniel's views, or that the character is a proxy for the author.

Rather than suggesting the novel as a straightforward plea for this kind of humanistic stewardship, it seems to me to be trying to balance such claims with those produced by the more recent posthumanist urge. Powers' earlier work has often been associated with the technological posthumanism derived from the work of critics such as Donna Haraway and N. Katherine Hayles; in *Ecosickness in Contemporary American Fiction*, Heather Houser offers a rather strained reading of the posthuman in *The Echo Maker* along these lines. She suggests that Mark 'mutates into the cinematic version of Frankenstein's monster' when the hospital 'slit[s] his throat and put[s] a bolt in his skull', but then concludes that 'Powers seems to disagree with Haraway over the liberating potential of the "cyborg"'.²⁵ We might do better though to suggest that the slitting of the throat and the bolt through the head are not in fact a reference to James Whale's *Frankenstein* (in which the bolt goes through the creature's neck), but, rather, a gruesome reminder of the two stages of cattle slaughter: mechanical

stunning, and exsanguination. The former constitutes the firing of a bolt through the skull of the creature using a pneumatic device or captive bolt pistol, causing massive damage to the cerebrum and cerebellum, a spike in intracranial pressure, and immediate loss of consciousness. The latter involves bleeding the stunned creature by the insertion of a knife into the thoracic cavity and the severance of the carotid artery and jugular vein. Reading the passage this way allows us to understand that Mark, suffering from ‘cerebral edema’ and requiring a ‘ventricular drain’ because ‘something had spiked the pressure’ inside his skull, has been transformed into a creature undergoing the very same procedure that his own work at the Iowa Beef Processors facilitates; accordingly, Karin feels the need to look ‘anywhere but at his animal eyes’ (10, 8). This moment in the novel does not, then, develop the idea that ‘transgressing boundaries that delimit humanness can be severely disabling rather than enabling and generative’, as Houser suggests.²⁶ Rather, it recalls Mark’s childhood acceptance of animality, and provides a salient reminder of the suffering of the non-human which predicates the sense of ourselves as human: those creatures must suffer in an inhuman way so that the demarcation between human and animal can be maintained as a difference in kind, rather than of degree.

This suggests the emergence in Powers of a different kind of posthumanism, then, one which has developed through critical animal studies and which, in the words of Cary Wolfe, demonstrates ‘that we – whoever “we” are – are in a profound sense constituted as human subjects within and atop a non human otherness.’²⁷ Wolfe points out the way in which earlier declarations of posthumanism were premised upon the idea of ‘human perfectibility’, which not only betrays a lingering humanism, but, in certain versions, represents in fact an ‘intensification of humanism’.²⁸ To be truly posthumanist (rather than merely posthuman) according to Wolfe, we must not only acknowledge our ethical obligation to other species – as Daniel in the novel does – but recognise the way in which our world is framed by the non-

human. If Mark's 'becoming animal' constitutes one part of this recognition, the form of the novel provides another. Each chapter of *The Echo Maker* is prefaced by a dreamlike depiction of the sandhill crane migration which for a few weeks of the year dominates the Nebraskan plains around the River Platte. These sections serve to envelop the 'terminally familiar' world being produced by the human under late capitalism in a world of non-human strangeness: 'This year's flight has always been. Something in the birds retraces a route laid down centuries before their parents showed it to them. And each crane recalls the route still to come' (4). As the brevity of the human element (the plot of the novel) is highlighted by the deep time of the crane, a genus which has one of the longest fossil histories of any bird and which precedes the human by about 8 million years, so too is the capacity of the human to structure the world implicitly challenged by the fact these sections are situated outside the main ordering principles of the novel as a form: the chapters. It is fitting, then, that one of the most powerful images of the novel is of a posthuman ecosystem of the future: 'when the surface of the earth is parched and spoiled, when life is pressed down to near-nothing [...] nature and its maps will use the worst that man can throw at it. The outcome of owls will orchestrate the night, millions of years after people work their own end' (443).

III. New Sincerity and the Demands of the Anthropocene

David Foster Wallace's oft-cited suggestion that fiction ought to be about 'what it means to be a fucking human being' has been taken as heralding a 'new sincerity' in fiction after postmodernism.²⁹ Although Foster Wallace himself offered innovative (sometimes torturous) ways of trying to achieve his aim, it is significant that the case for sincerity is made most convincingly, according to Adam Kelly, by considering those writers, such as Franzen, who 'uphold the canons of realism'.³⁰ One of the reasons for this is sincerity's apparent

dependence on ‘the notion of the liberal subject that also underlies classic nineteenth-century realist fiction’, as Kelly notes, and as we see in *Purity*.³¹ Amitav Ghosh, in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), notes this focus on the individual subject in the recent fiction of, what he calls, ‘sincerity and authenticity’; he suggests that the consequence is that such fiction can only frame moral questions as matters of individual choice.³² This is, Ghosh argues, inadequate for thinking about the exigencies of our time, which are primarily ecological, not only because these are issues which need to be addressed by the collective commons, but because any individual would then be subjected to a test of sincerity and consistency which most would fail (who can truly say that they do everything possible to help prevent environmental degradation?)

It is effectively this test that Anabel is made to fail by Franzen, as she gives in to what the novel frames as ‘reality’ by finally agreeing to take some of her father’s money to help Pip. That failure might be better understood in the context of an essay by Franzen published in the *New Yorker* in 2015.³³ There Franzen bemoans the fact that climate change has come to dominate the ecological agenda on the grounds that it has had the effect of marginalising the more immediate goals of conservation. He argues that the abstraction of climate change – the way in which any individual’s effort to improve the situation has no discernible effect – works against our intuitive logic: ‘the human brain evolved to focus on the present, not the far future’ so that climate change ‘deeply confuses’ it.³⁴ Thus, Franzen frames the contemporary ecological moment as offering a choice between saving birds in the present or saving humans of the future; he declares himself personally in favour of the former. The sensibility behind this strange, defeatist, and implausible argument (decried by many, including the American Audubon Society) produces a tension in *Purity*, which feels like a novel designed to recuperate the form as one primarily concerned with individual selfhood (in the wake of postmodernism’s alleged assault on it) written by someone who does not

really like – and has little faith in – the human.³⁵ Anabel's efforts, then, count for nothing in Franzen's fictional world because they would count for nothing in the world outside the novel.

Franzen notes in the *New Yorker* piece that we 'live in the Anthropocene now'.³⁶ Defined broadly as the epoch when human activity is considered to be the dominant influence on the ecology of the Earth, the concept, although proposed by scientists, has had most impact in the arts and humanities. For Timothy Clark – as for Ghosh – the Anthropocene represents 'a cultural threshold', which requires us to be more inventive in all aspects of critical thinking because the problems it raises 'resist representation of the kinds of scale on which most thinking, culture, art and politics operate.'³⁷ Clark sees the Anthropocene as demanding nothing less than a revolution in cultural activity, asking: 'at what point does continuing in activities that were once merely normal or even admirable turn, despite itself, into intellectual evasion?'³⁸ If it was already possible to intuit something intellectually evasive in Franzen's turn to realism as it was articulated and rationalised in 'Mr Difficult', the writer's notorious piece on William Gaddis, then Gram's demonstration of the way in which the ecological engagement of *Freedom* is stymied by this aesthetic decision only furthers that sense.³⁹ What *Purity*, and the *New Yorker* piece reveal, however, is that the ecological views are, or have become, just as conservative, just as defeatist, as Franzen's views on fiction.⁴⁰

Franzen's way of setting off the human against the non-human ignores the axiom articulated by the American environmental thinker John Muir: 'when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.' The quotation is used as a subheading in Powers' short story 'The Seventh Event', published a couple of years before *The Echo Maker*.⁴¹ The story represents a fictional reminiscence about a late scholar of ecology called Mia Erdmann by a school acquaintance (a fiction writer named Richard

Powers) frustrated by the continued assumption ‘that all of life hung upon humanity’.⁴²

Erdmann – a scientist by vocation, but with wide interests – found this assumption reinforced by the novel as a form. Her own work constituted a plea for ‘a literature that tried to recover the obscene majority of existence typically brushed aside by the novel of character revelation’.⁴³ The story provides a clever way for Powers to express an ideal while also incorporating within the narrative his own intuitive response to the difficulty of that ideal: the authorial surrogate notes, ‘Erdmann scared me out of the fiction of the self. But I feel a little fraudulent ignoring that self’.⁴⁴ *The Echo Maker* is an attempt to negotiate this difficulty, an attempt to balance the desire for a non-human perspective with the constant pull of one’s own species. Its ruminations on consciousness and memory make it a novel concerned with the very notion of what a (human) self is; but the oneiric mingling of the human and non-human perspectives highlights the fact that humans are not the only makers of meaning in the world. In so doing it offers an example of the way in which the novel as a cultural interjection might harness postmodernism’s challenge to human subjectivity and representationalism, and turn it towards new and urgent ends.

¹ The reviews are: Julian Baggini, ‘More Equal than Others’, and Ian Sansom, ‘Barthes Snacks’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 July 2016. See <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/more-equal-than-others-3/> and <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/public/barthes-snacks/> [both accessed: 2 June 2017].

² See, for example, ‘How a Vegetarian Diet Could Help Save the Planet’, *Time*, 21 March 2016. <http://time.com/4266874/vegetarian-diet-climate-change/> [accessed: 2 June 2017]. For the science behind the article, see ‘Analysis and Valuation of the Health and Climate Change Cobenefits of dietary Change’, *Proceedings of the National Academy of the Science of United States of America*, vol. 113, no. 15 (2016), available here: <http://www.pnas.org/content/113/15/4146> [accessed: 2 June 2017].

³ Scott Hermanson uses the term ‘econovelist’ to describe Richard Powers in ‘Just Behind the Billboard: The Instability of *Prisoner’s Dilemma*’, in Stephen J. Burn and Peter Dempsey (eds.), *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers* (Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008), pp. 60-74, p. 62; Stephen J. Burn notes the applicability of the term for Franzen in his book *Jonathan Franzen at the End of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Continuum, 2008), p. 22. There is not the space here to think more broadly about representations of vegetarianism in fiction, but in the context it is worthy of note that perhaps the most famous literary vegetarian, P.B. Shelley, offered a prescient argument about the inefficiency of pasturage, writing: ‘the quantity of nutritious vegetable matter consumed in fattening the carcase of an ox would afford ten times the sustenance [...] if gathered immediately from the bosom of the earth’. Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Vindication of Natural Diet’ [1812], in David Lee Clark (ed.), *Shelley’s Prose; or The Trumpet of a Prophecy* (London: Fourth Estate, 1988), pp. 81-90, p. 86.

⁴ One of the other writers in this debate, Jonathan Safran Foer, has written an insightful work of non-fiction on the topic: *Eating Animals* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2009). Foer's novel *Everything is Illuminated* (2002) includes a vegetarian character, since the protagonist is a fictionalised version of the author, but the reference to vegetarianism is slight and so I have not included discussion of it here.

⁵ Carol J. Adams, *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist Vegetarian Critical Theory*, Twentieth Anniversary Edition (New York and London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 217.

⁷ Jonathan Franzen, *Purity* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015), p. 342. Subsequent references to the novel will be cited parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

⁸ It should be noted that it is Tom's subsequent partner, Leila, who describes Anabel as 'full-chestedly anorexic'.

⁹ Colm Toibin, 'Jonathan Franzen's *Purity*', *New York Times*, 26 August 2015, n.p., https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/30/books/review/jonathan-franzen-purity-review.html?_r=0; Duncan White, 'Purity by Jonathan Franzen, review', *The Daily Telegraph*, 14 August 2015, n.p., <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/purity-by-jonathan-franzen-review/>; Tim Adams, 'Purity by Jonathan Franzen review', *The Guardian*, 6 September 2015, n.p., <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/06/purity-jonathan-franzen-review-piercingly-brilliant> [all accessed: 26 May 2017]

¹⁰ 'Hippie single mom' was the verdict of Benjamin Markovits in *The Independent*. Benjamin Markovits, 'Purity by Jonathan Franzen', *The Independent*, 6 August 2015, n.p., <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/purity-by-jonathan-franzen-book-review-10443291.html> [accessed: 26 May 2017].

¹¹ This ideological construction of veganism as a form of extremism is of a piece with the single instance of it in *The Corrections*, where 'vegan prophets' are catalogued alongside 'bomb-makers' and others on the anarchist fringe. Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Picador, 2002), p. 341.

¹² Philip Weinstein, *Jonathan Franzen: The Comedy of Rage* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 151.

¹³ Margaret Hunt Gram, 'Freedom's Limits: Jonathan Franzen, the Realist Novel, and the Problem of Growth', *American Literary History*, vol. 26, no. 2 (Summer 2014), pp. 295-316, p. 296.

¹⁴ 'Individual moral adventure' is taken from John Updike's review of Abdelrahman Munif's *Cities of Salt* in the *New Yorker* (17 October 1988), and indicates, apparently, what Updike thinks the pattern of a good realist novel should be; the review is discussed in Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press: 2016), p. 77.

¹⁵ Richard Powers, 'Making the Rounds', in Stephen J. Burn and Peter Dempsey (eds.), *Intersections: Essays on Richard Powers* (Champaign and London: Dalkey Archive Press: 2008), pp. 305-310, p. 309.

¹⁶ The novel as a form has often gone further than the 'new physics', as described by Powers, in that it has challenged the distinction between the putative real world and the artificial world; this is most explicitly done in postmodernist fiction.

¹⁷ Richard Powers, *The Echo Maker* (London: Vintage, 2007), p. 167. Subsequent references to the novel will be cited parenthetically in the main body of the essay.

¹⁸ Mark's job is to repair slaughterhouse machinery.

¹⁹ 'In the Heart of the Heartland' is the name of Margaret Atwood's review of the novel. *New York Review of Books*, 21 December 2006. <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/2006/12/21/in-the-heart-of-the-heartland/> [accessed: 2 June 2017].

²⁰ Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: The Search for a Perfect Meal in a Fast-Food World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 10.

²¹ Karin works for the 'third largest' computer vendor in the country (16).

²² Karin's surprise that these cow parts can be sold 'in this part of the country' misses the way in which the local is imbricated with the global: food from Iowa Beef Processors is not, of course, sold only around the town of Kearney, the states of Nebraska and Iowa, or the Midwest more generally; rather it is distributed throughout the US. The multinational Tyson Foods, which acquired Iowa Beef Processors in 2001, boasts on its website that it produces 1 in 5 pounds of all the chicken, beef and pork in the US. <http://ir.tyson.com/investor-relations/investor-overview/tyson-factbook/> [accessed: 2 June 2017]

²³ Michel Serres, *The Natural Contract*, trans. E. MacArthur and W. Paulson (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

²⁴ 'Self-righteousness' is taken from William Deresiewicz's scathing review of the novel. He writes: 'Instead of letting the story speak, he [Powers] is the only one who speaks. Instead of locating meaning in experience, he locates it in ideas. But novels should test ideas, not surrender to them. The same is true of beliefs. Powers's pious self-righteousness is expressed here through Daniel, the Christ-like environmentalist who lives on couscous and currants, turns his heat off at night and finally flees the all-too-human world. Powers is as

ethically coercive as he is intellectually pedantic.’ William Deresiewicz, ‘Science Fiction’, *Nation*, 9 October 2006, pp. 25-28, p. 28.

²⁵ Heather Houser, *Ecosickness in Contemporary American Fiction: Environment and Affect* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), p. 111.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 111-112.

²⁷ Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), pp. xiv-x.

²⁸ Indeed, many critics have struggled to precisely locate, or describe the posthumanism of Powers. For Quentin D. Miller, Powers’ subject matter is posthumanist, even though he produces ‘relatively traditional humanist novels,’ so that his ‘posthumanism’ constitutes more of an attempt to redefine humanism than surpass it; Matt Silva agrees, suggesting that there is a ‘vestigial humanism’ in *Galatea 2.2*, while for Christopher Taylor, Powers remains ‘a liberal humanist at heart’. Quentin D. Miller, ‘Deeper Blues, or the Posthuman Prometheus Cybernetic Renewal and the Late-Twentieth-Century American Novel’, *American Literature* vol. 77, no. 2 (2005), pp. 379-407, p. 383; Matt Silva, ‘The “Powers” to “Kraft” Humanist Endings to Posthumanist Novels: *Galatea 2.2* as a Rewriting of *Operation Wandering Soul*’, *Critique*, vol. 50, no. 2, (2008-2009), pp. 208-224, p. 220; Christopher Taylor, review of *Generosity* by Richard Powers, *The Guardian*, 2 January 2010, n.p., <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2010/jan/02/richard-powers-generosity-fiction-review> [accessed: 2 June 2017].

²⁹ Larry McCaffery, ‘A Conversation with David Foster Wallace’, available here: <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-david-foster-wallace-by-larry-mccaffery/> [accessed: 2 June 2017], n.p. Originally in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Vol. 13 No. 2 (Summer 1993).

³⁰ Adam Kelly, ‘Dialectic of Sincerity: Lionel Trilling and David Foster Wallace’, *Post45*, 17 October 2014, n.p., <http://post45.research.yale.edu/2014/10/dialectic-of-sincerity-lionel-trilling-and-david-foster-wallace/> [accessed: 1 June 2017].

³¹ Kelly, *ibid.*

³² Ghosh, p. 128. Ghosh conflates ‘sincerity’ and ‘authenticity’, where for Kelly there is an important distinction between the two, but they are writing about the same kind of fiction.

³³ Jonathan Franzen, ‘Carbon Capture’, *New Yorker*, 6 April 2015, online edition, n.p. Available here: <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/04/06/carbon-capture> [accessed: 20 October 2017].

³⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 18.

³⁵ When cutely suggesting that ‘climate change is everyone’s fault – in other words, no one’s’ (para 10), Franzen implies that the moral responsibility of the individual is diminished or eroded by arguing the need for collective action. In so doing, he tacitly endorses a staple of conservative American thinking since the time of McCarthy; the sentence, indeed, echoes almost word for word William F. Buckley’s argument against Noam Chomsky’s view on the culpability of the American populace in the war in Vietnam: ‘if everybody is guilty of everything, then nobody is guilty of anything’, Buckley commented in their televised debate on the war. ‘Vietnam and the Intellectuals’, *Firing Line*, 4.13. 3 April 1969.

³⁶ Franzen, ‘Carbon Capture’, para. 20.

³⁷ Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Cultural Threshold* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 10.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

³⁹ Jonathan Franzen, ‘Mr Difficult’, *New Yorker*, 30 September 2002, pp. 100-111.

⁴⁰ Like *The Echo Maker*, *Freedom* includes an engagement with migratory birds. Gram labels this a ‘small foray’ into ‘formal experimentation’, however her description of it as ‘a tiny plot’ reveals that the aspect is in fact assimilated within the realist framework. Compared to the way in which Powers’ novel – which was published four years before *Freedom* – incorporates the non-human at the level of structure, Franzen’s attempt seems merely gestural; there is nothing like it in *Purity*. Gram, p. 312.

⁴¹ Richard Powers, ‘The Seventh Event’, *Granta* 90, 7 July 2005, pp. 57-74. The Muir quotation is from *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014; reprint edition), p. 114.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 60. Wendell Berry has made a similar point, noting that, ‘A common complaint nowadays is that humans think the world is “anthropocentric,” or human-centered. I understand the complaint; the assumptions of so-called anthropocentrism often result in gross and dangerous insubordination. And yet I don’t know how the human species can avoid some version of self-centredness; I don’t know how any species can’. Berry’s tempered, and sensible conclusion is that, ‘We must acknowledge both the centrality and the limits of our self-interest. One can hardly imagine a tougher situation’. Wendell Berry, ‘Preserving Wilderness’, reprinted in Bill McKibben (ed.), *American Earth: Environmental Writing Since Thoreau* (New York: Library of America, 2008), pp. 515-530, p. 527.